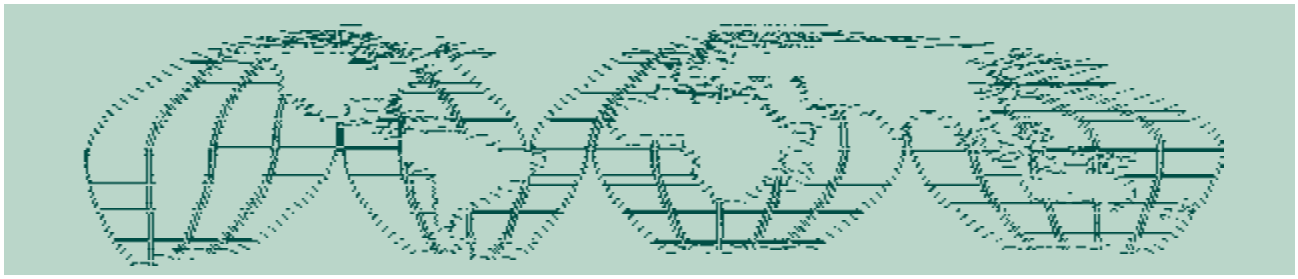
# Aftermath: Internally Displaced Women and Women's Organizations in Postconflict Georgia



*Center for Development Information and Evaluation*
*U.S. Agency for International Development, Washington*

## Summary

ALL POST-SOVIET STATES underwent difficult political and economic transitions in the years after the breakup of the Soviet Union, but Georgia's was especially traumatic. Ethnic conflict* broke out in Georgia virtually as soon as the Soviet Union collapsed. By 1992, Georgia's central authority had been diminished to near anarchy, the economy was in complete disarray, and the country had plunged into civil war that tore its fabric.

In October 1999 USAID's Center for Development Information and Evaluation (CDIE) fielded a team to Georgia to examine the effects of ethnic conflict on internally displaced women from the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where conflict was particularly destructive. The team sought as well to study the growth of women's organizations in Georgia. The mission was part of a broader study of women in postconflict societies that also included Bosnia–Herzegovina, Cambodia, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Rwanda.

Ethnic Georgians who survived ethnic-based attacks, forced migration, and escape along what came to be known as the death path out of Abkhazia still faced a life of grueling poverty and extreme stress in crowded, often unsanitary living conditions. Today the ongoing misery of internally displaced persons remains among the most pressing social, economic, and political problems Georgia faces. Women have been particularly affected by the violence of the wars, as both victims and participants, and by the impact displacement has had on their lives. Since the wars, women have increasingly carried responsibility for the everyday survival of their families and the community of displaced persons generally.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) began forming from the first days of independence. But civil society really began to open up in 1995, when the economy and polity improved. Women's organizations then began a period of staggering growth. They flourished especially in the capital, T'bilisi, but organizations to help internally displaced people also began to proliferate in regions where the displaced were resettled.

The CDIE team found that displaced women can be resourceful and creative in providing desperately needed resources for their families, especially through petty trading. The international community can help best by providing microcredit programs and other aid to encourage self-reliance, often working through women's organizations. Aid to support psychosocial counseling may also be in order, both for women and for Georgia's internally displaced men, who were doubly traumatized, first by losing the war and then by losing the ability to provide for their families.

*Minorities make up 30 percent of the Georgian population and include Armenians (8 percent), Russians (6 percent), Azeris (5 percent), Ossets (3 percent), and Abkhaz (2 percent). Despite their small numbers relative to the national population, Abkhaz and Ossets asserted their nationalism and took control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, respectively, during the civil wars of the early 1990s.

# After Conflict, Displacement and Despair

By the time Georgia declared independence in 1991, ethnic tension had become part of the political discourse. At the conclusion of especially bitter armed conflict in the regions of Abkhazia in 1992 and South Ossetia in 1993, thousands of civilians had been killed, dozens of villages had been razed, and more than 300,000 ethnic Georgians had been driven from their homes. The tremendous flow of displaced persons into Georgia taxed the country's infrastructure and government resources, already weakened by various conflicts and a general post-Soviet economic collapse. The issue of internally displaced persons—55 to 60 percent of them women—has come to dominate political life in Georgia and has made a permanent solution to the conflict intrinsically difficult to achieve.

The enduring "temporary" displacement that women especially have suffered since the end of civil war augments and prolongs the disruptions caused by the violence and conflict itself. The Georgian conflicts were relatively short, but in the decade since the fighting ceased, the misery of displaced families has only grown. A 1995 Oxfam survey of displaced women and children concluded that the community suffered posttraumatic stress disorder syndrome on a near-epidemic level. The misery has many causes. Among them:

## *Rapid Decline in Living Standard*

More than 85 percent of the displaced persons live in public housing provided by the Georgian government. These so-called collective centers consist of Soviet-era hotels, hospitals, schools, factories, and other buildings roughly converted into "temporary" living centers. Most of the 3,600 collective centers throughout the country are barely adequate as housing: They are decrepit and overcrowded. Sanitation is often dismal. Disease rates have risen dramatically.

Conditions in the collective centers have made for particularly stressful times for displaced women. A 1997 survey concluded that 51 percent of the households of displaced people consistently lacked adequate clothing, and 79 percent were without enough food. Basic medical services are also wanting.

## *Changes in the Economic Roles of Women*

Most of the Georgian women who fled the region left relatively prosperous lives behind them. Many were trained professionals who had worked as teachers and economists, in manufacturing and healthcare, and in other trades. Seventy-two percent of displaced women surveyed had been fully employed before the outbreak of war.

> ***'Women have come to be the main source of income in 72 percent of Georgian displaced households. But gender roles have remained clearly delineated. Women are still expected to perform traditional household duties, even after long days trading on street corners.'***

In the years since displacement, internally displaced women (and men) have struggled under the massive weight of poverty and unemployment. To make a semblance of a living, displaced women have left their shelters and homes by the thousands throughout Georgia to engage in unofficial trade and agriculture. They sell products in crowded bazaars, on street corners, in subway stations, peddling everything from sunflower seeds to imported electronics.

Indeed, women have come to be the main source of income in 72 percent of Georgian displaced households. The role as leading family income earners has not, however, led to a growing sense of empowerment within the family or displaced communities in general. On the contrary, gender roles have remained clearly delineated. Women are still expected to perform traditional household duties, even after long days trading on street corners.

### *Traumatized Men*

In addition to the heavy toll on the psychological and physical health of women, the trauma of displacement has, in profound ways, affected the psychological well-being of men. Put simply, women have been much more successful at adapting to the difficult conditions and strains of everyday life in the community of internally displaced persons.

In a 1996 study of the internally displaced, the Foundation for the Development of Human Resources, a Georgian nongovernmental organization, noted that men were "paralyzed" by the problems of the present day. Their lives were often characterized by escapism, by "empty and routine time-passing," and by a growing pattern of alcoholism.

Most displaced women interviewed by the CDIE team indicated that their husbands and other men have been "double traumatized" by the conflict and its aftermath. On the one hand, many displaced men feel personally responsible for losing the war and abandoning their homes and former lives, their families forced into exile and destitution simply through their inability to win the war. On the other hand, men have felt unable to fulfill their traditional role as leaders of their families.

Worse, many men are deeply ashamed that women have become more creative at finding alternative sources of income, however paltry, through trading and other ventures. Displaced men have tended to shun income-generating donor programming such as microcredit out of this growing sense of shame. The idleness of their men only adds to women's woes.

### *Lack of Political Participation And Representation*

Internally displaced women remain very much disconnected from the political process of post-conflict Georgia. There are disproportionately few women in positions of power. Almost universally, the handful of displaced women currently in positions of power at both the national and local levels are former communist elites with little interest in advancing women's rights—displaced or otherwise.

## The Rise Of Women's Organizations

Civil society has begun to develop in Georgia partly because the disastrous posttransition economic slump has economically and professionally *disempowered* many of Georgia's highly educated professional women and leaders—including, but not only, internally displaced women. Women at all levels of society must now seek work well below their qualifications and former status.

One way for highly educated and professional women to recoup their lost status is to found or participate in nongovernmental organizations. This partly explains the recent proliferation of NGOs of all kinds. Increasing numbers of women's organizations concentrating on the internally displaced have been founded in recent years, paralleling a generous flourishing of civil society throughout post-Soviet and postconflict Georgia. Around the country, displaced women have begun mobilizing to find solutions to pressing economic and social issues.

Many of these organizations are small, underfunded, lacking in capacity, and probably ultimately unsustainable. But they have two advantages. First, their leaders, as members of the intelligentsia, have access to those with influence and money in the Georgian elite. Second, so many issues are relevant to women that there is more than enough scope for start-up organizations to make a bid for funding from local or international donors. Those already established have a good chance of receiving more funding once they have accounted for their first grant.

Government- and donor-organized NGOs are also contributing significantly to knowledge building, research, networking, leadership training, and the direct provision of services to a wide range of beneficiaries, including displaced persons. The most reputable government-organized NGO is the Abkhaz Women's Council, which—though it is independent, nonpartisan, and nonpolitical—still receives in-kind support from the Abkhaz government in exile and the Georgian government. The most notable donor-organized NGO is Horizonti, which evolved from an earlier group and was quickly certified as a private voluntary organization eligible

for USAID funding. Horizonti provides grant funding for various purposes to other Georgian NGOs.

## Activities of Women's Organizations

Some women's organizations specialize in lobbying the government on particular issues. Many have evolved into national advocacy organizations for displaced people. Some groups have called attention to such issues as the degradation of collective housing centers. Largely service-oriented organizations are delivering programs ranging from psychosocial rehabilitation to credit and training in business planning. Some NGOs have become effective partners for donors both in providing humanitarian assistance and for developing microcredit and small and medium-size enterprise programs. Still others first developed as small community-based organizations of women desperate to improve conditions for their families. But most of the organizations are multipurpose, and there is a good deal of overlap among them.

> ***'Stress-related illnesses are common throughout the population but affect men and women in different ways.'***

### *Psychosocial Rehabilitation Programs*

Because of the many social, economic, and political changes associated with the transition from a centralized state to a market economy and a democratic political system, all Georgians have been enduring stress for the past nine years. Stress-related illnesses are common throughout the population but affect men and women in different ways.

Many NGOs are beginning to recognize that men aged 35 to 50 are especially vulnerable, both psychologically and economically. The double traumatization—having lost the war and having been unable to support their families in the years since displacement—accounts for this. Many men, financially sterile outside of a measly government pension, are humiliated that their wives have become the primary breadwinners. Displaced men are much less willing than women to take menial jobs such as petty trading to support their families. They also tend to shun income-generating programs and retraining opportunities.

### *Programs in Microcredit and Small And Medium-Size Enterprises*

Many donors are sponsoring microcredit projects and training programs in small and medium-size enterprises for both men and women. There are also some (though fewer) vocational training programs. Because displaced women have become increasingly involved in small-scale trading in markets and bazaars throughout the country, donors and women's organizations have begun partnering together on microcredit lending to women. The Norwegian Refugee Council has united with Women in Business to create a small-business revolving fund for up to a thousand clients, with the goal of transforming itself into a self-sustaining credit union. Beginning with 100-lari (US$50) disbursements at 3 percent interest with six-month terms, the loans will increase in number and volume as they are repaid. Although still in its first stages, this partnership has had an almost flawless rate of payback. Similarly, the international NGO Save the Children works with the women's organization Constanta, whose primary role is to provide low-interest loans to groups of internally displaced women traders. By spring 1999, Constanta's loan default rate (with 2,480 clients) was under 2 percent.

### *Education and Training*

Georgian women's educational levels have traditionally been high. Many displaced women with university and graduate degrees have gravitated to civil society to help others help themselves. Some groups are involved in providing education for orphans and other young people as well as peace education for youths. One concern is that educational attainment is falling for displaced youth because they lack money for books and school clothes or have to earn money for their families.

### *Human Rights and Civic Education*

Some women's NGOs are primarily or exclusively advocacy organizations and work closely with members of Parliament and others to ensure that Georgia implements the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which the government signed in September 1994. With the support of USAID and other donors, the Young Lawyers Association, while not a women's organization as such, has done considerable work to define and guarantee women's legal, human, and civil rights. The Georgian women's group Women's Initiative for Equality is spearheading efforts to create an umbrella group of women's NGOs to execute various tasks.

## Constraints on Performance

Despite the growing number of success stories among indigenous organizations, the sector suffers certain limitations. Some of the factors that limit performance in Georgian women's organizations are not unique to Georgia; they are characteristic of most developing countries. Developing countries often lack a history of volunteerism; corruption and inadequate codes of ethics are common; distinctions between civil society and the private sector (or in Georgia's case, the public sector) are blurred; and the nongovernmental sector is often dominated by interlocking elites, whose board memberships overlap.

> ***'There is little networking between organizations, NGO programming itself tends to be donor driven, and few NGOs have sought or been able to find alternative sources of funding.'***

Leaders of Georgia's women's organizations come almost exclusively from the intelligentsia. In a sense these women have suffered deprivation in income, social status, and physical comfort, but they are still at the top of the social hierarchy, just below the former power elite. As Georgia continues its transition to a free-market economy in a democratic state, the same people will often fill (or influence who fills) new leadership positions that open up. Socioeconomic and political status, personal or family wealth, and current influence all tend to meld together as a series of interlocking elite groups.

With one exception, all leaders the CDIE team met had at least an undergraduate degree. Many had been professors or researchers. Most also had previous political and social visibility. But these women leaders were not operating in their fields of expertise, and most admitted having little management experience or organizational know-how. Competent bookkeepers and accountants (especially women) are among the categories of the newly unemployed. Most donors are strict about bookkeeping and accounting for funds. That Horizonti passed a tough USAID audit after only a year of operation is a singular success. But strategic planning for sustainability is a skill as rare in Georgia as in most transitioning countries, and few donors have been prepared to help private voluntary and nongovernmental organizations plan for sustainability even over the medium term.

Membership in Georgian women's organizations tends to be limited, even for organizations with regional branches. The team's survey of internally displaced women revealed that only 17 percent of respondents belong to any organization, including NGOs and political parties. Women leaders and experts stressed that women do not necessarily want to collaborate any more than men do. One explanation may be that ordinary women, especially displaced women, are too preoccupied with the struggle for survival to have time for organizations.

Instead of specializing, most of the organizations studied are doing similar activities, often in the same location. Because they often operate outside their main areas of expertise, they could use support from outside specialists but apparently do not call on other women and organizations for such help. One potential consortium intended to include 16 women's organizations but had not yet been formally established because the members could not agree on a leader.

Relatively few organizations are concerned with issues affecting displaced women, and those organizations considered successful often see others as rivals, especially in competing for donor funding. Thus, there is little networking between organizations, NGO programming itself tends to be donor driven, and few NGOs have sought or been able to find alternative sources of funding.

Still, organizations for displaced women push forward to address critical social issues such as deteriorating health and living conditions and the growing importance of microcredit and training for women in the marketplace. Local NGOs and community-based organizations with strong community ties will remain valuable partners for donors as they shift from humanitarian assistance toward development-oriented programming.

## Georgian Women and Politics

Few women in leadership positions in Georgia's NGOs have tried to make the jump from civil society to politics. Many women's NGO leaders shun the political limelight. Several of those interviewed said NGOs must improve before they can forge direct links with political parties.

There is a strong and perhaps growing divide between political party activity and women's NGOs. Women increasingly have joined women's organizations in lieu of political parties because they perceive that political parties are insensitive to their needs. Moreover, to be effective the organizations themselves must appear independent of political links. There is a widely held belief that the political system is ineffective at promoting needed reform and that parties and political figures are often too compromised or corrupt to take action to improve the lot of women throughout the country. The few women who have made it into the upper reaches of political life have openly eschewed women's organizations and many of their concerns. Established female politicians fear being marginalized as "women's leaders" in the eyes of the Georgian electorate and hence are openly antagonistic toward so-called feminist ideas and the legal promotion of women's rights.

Most women's organizational leaders the CDIE team interviewed characterized the government's positions toward women's organizations, women's rights, and gender issues as largely indifferent. Many were disillusioned with the leadership's inability and unwillingness to put into practice laws and decrees designed to promote women's rights. Others remained exasperated with the government's acceptance of traditional gender roles.

## Women's Groups and International Donors

The nature of international assistance has changed radically in recent years. The transformation is particularly true of aid designed to help the displaced and more vulnerable segments of Georgian society. Before 1998, donors concentrated on two broad types of assistance: at the macro level, aid to help a battered and unstable government shore up tottering economic and political institutions in the wake of its 1993 near collapse; and locally, food, clothing, and rehabilitated shelter for the internally displaced and other intensely vulnerable populations. Many donors after a few years concluded that local populations were not helped enough by their programs. Some feared they had created a culture of dependency on emergency assistance within the community of displaced persons without doing much to alleviate the suffering of enough Georgians, 43 percent of whom live below the poverty line.

Beginning in 1998, donor agencies and international NGOs—including USAID, the Norwegian Refugee Council, the International Rescue Committee, Save the Children, and Care—began shifting their programs from humanitarian assistance activities to sustainable development programs designed to help vulnerable communities and individuals help themselves. Donors began trying to strengthen displaced persons' self-reliance through professional and agricultural training activities and microcredit programs. The strategy was to provide a bridge from emergency to development programs for displaced and in-place communities alike. Local people now were not just being targeted for relief; in some instances, they were involved in carrying out and sometimes even designing novel programs.

Donors have recognized that women's organizations are particularly effective partners in assess-

ing the needs of vulnerable communities, especially internally displaced persons. Many international organizations are aware that war and displacement have uniquely affected women, many of whom have increasingly carried the burden of providing for their families. To target local populations more effectively, donors have emphasized newfound relationships with Georgia's nascent NGOs—especially women's organizations. Groups such as the Abkhaz Women's Council and the Association of Internally Displaced Abkhaz Women have been increasingly important conduits for distributing humanitarian aid and providing basic health services.

More broadly, women play a quiet but growing role as decision-makers and leaders within their nuclear families and communities, especially in public housing centers for the internally displaced. Recognizing this, USAID has funded a series of leadership training programs organized by the Academy for Educational Development for heads of women's organizations.

> ***'Everywhere the CDIE team traveled, there was a perception that only an in-group of NGOs received donor funding, that this group does not grow much, and that once a particular NGO becomes a donor's "darling" it continues to receive funding from that donor to the exclusion of others.'***

Donors moving away from humanitarian assistance and cooperating more fully with women's organizations have encountered some problems. Women's organizations, like all NGOs in Georgia, depend on donor funding and grants. To attract such support, they often broaden their scope rather than specialize in a sector in which they might have a comparative advantage. Because few mature and fully independent women's organizations exist yet in Georgia, some are organized by donors or the government. Sometimes strong local NGOs find donor management styles difficult to accept.

Everywhere the CDIE team traveled, there was a perception that only an in-group of NGOs received donor funding, that this group does not grow much, and that once a particular NGO becomes a donor's "darling" it continues to receive funding from that donor to the exclusion of others. Donors' local staff members—or their relatives or friends—create some of these favorites. Moreover, the spouses or family members of Georgian government officials tend to create or work for NGOs that receive donor funding, or they receive scarce positions at international NGOs that have grant funds.

Although a thousand women's organizations are registered, only about 60 NGOs have managed donor funds effectively more than once or have participated in enough donor-funded capacity building to be seen as worthy of funding. Other nascent women's regional organizations are likely to receive grants from at least one donor in the next three years. Not all organizations can be sustained unless the Georgian economy improves dramatically and a new tradition of voluntarism develops. To survive without significant external funding, membership-based organizations must become bigger and require membership dues. Whether this kind of organizational structure lends itself to life in post-Soviet Georgia remains to be seen.

## Lessons and Recommendations

**1. *Donors should formulate programs to help internally displaced women alleviate economic hardships.*** Displaced Georgian women have shown remarkable entrepreneurial spirit in providing desperately needed resources for their families, mainly through petty trading. They now dominate informal urban markets.

**2. *Microcredit programs can help displaced women begin or continue trading ventures and can contribute to women's self-reliance and self-confidence.*** Private Georgian banks demand stiflingly high collateral terms and interest rates, which displaced women cannot provide.

**3. *Traumatized internally displaced men also need programs.*** Doubly traumatized by losing the war and by their inability to provide for their families, Georgian men are further shamed when their wives bring in whatever nonpension income they consume. Many Georgian men and women need psychological counseling.

**4. *The international community could encourage women's involvement in local political decision-making by supporting civic and political education for them.*** Most displaced Georgian women have little understanding of or trust or interest in politics. CDIE's survey showed that they were often misinformed about or ignorant of their political rights and responsibilities. Few took part in politics. Fewer still rose to local political leadership positions. Most members of displaced-women's organizations were not involved in the organization's decision-making.

## Suggested Reading


Boutroue, Joel; and Stephen Jones. 1997. *Prospect for the Return of Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees to Abkhazia: A UNHCR Review of the Situation in Georgia.* T'bilisi, Georgia: UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

Buck, Thomas. 1999. *Women, War, and Displacement in Georgia.* Academy for Educational Development. Washington: USAID.

Gender Development Association. 1999. *Conditions of Women in Georgia.* A report for UNDP. T'bilisi, Georgia.

Greene, Thomas. 1998. "Internal Displacement in the North Caucasus, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia." In Roberta Cohen and Francis M. Deng, eds. *The Forsaken People: Case Studies of the Internally Displaced*, 233–311. Washington: Brookings Institution Press.

Human Rights Watch. 1996. *The Commonwealth of Independent States: Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Russian Federation, and Tajikistan.* New York.

Jones, Stephen. 1996. "Georgia's Return From Chaos." *Current History* 95(603): 340–45.

Kharashvili, Julia. 1995. *Psychosocial Examination of IDP Children and Women—Victims of Military Conflicts on the Territory of the Republic of Georgia.* T'bilisi, Georgia: Oxfam.

MacFarlane, S. Neil; Larry Minear; and Stephen D. Shenfield. 1996. *Armed Conflict in Georgia: A Case Study in Humanitarian Action and Peacekeeping.* Occasional Paper No. 21. Providence, R.I.: the Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies, Brown University.

Norwegian Refugee Council. 1995. *Survey on Internally Displaced People in Georgia.* T'bilisi, Georgia.

United Nations. April 1995. *The United Nations and the Situation in Georgia.* Reference Paper. New York: UN Department of Public Information.

Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children. 1998. *Women Displaced in the Southern Caucasus: An Examination of Humanitarian Assistance Needs in Azerbaijan, Armenia, Nagorno–Karabakh, and Georgia.* Field Report of the April 1998 Fact-Finding Delegation. New York.

———. 2000. *Report on a Survey of Internally Displaced Women and Their Families in Three Regions of Georgia.* Report submitted to USAID's Center for Development Information and Evaluation.



*This Highlights, by Pat McNees, summarizes the findings of Working Paper No. 310,* Aftermath: Effects of Conflict on Internally Displaced Women in Georgia, *by Thomas Buck, with Alice Morton, Susan Allen Nan, and Feride Zurikashvili; and of Working Paper No. 305,* Aftermath: Women's Organizations in Georgia, *by Alice Morton, Susan Allen Nan, Thomas Buck, and Feride Zurikashvili. Editorial services provided by Conwal Incorporated. To access this Highlights or other CDIE documents from the Internet, key in www.usaid.gov. Click on Partner Resources, then on USAID Evaluation Publications.*